

PREVENTION OPPORTUNITIES UNDER THE BIG SKY

MOST MONTANANS SUPPORT A PRIMARY SEAT BELT LAW

In 2005, Montana ranked 6th in the nation for the highest age-adjusted death rate for occupants in motor vehicle crashes (18.8 per 100,000), which is three times higher than the national motor vehicle death rate (6.4 per 100,000).¹ During this time period the motor vehicle crash death rates were higher for men (27.3 per 100,000) than for women (10.4 per 100,000), and American Indians (40.1 per 100,000) than for whites (17.2 per 100,000).¹ In 2007, there were 276 motor vehicle crash fatalities in Montana and many more serious injuries in motor vehicle crashes.² There are multiple factors that contribute to this extraordinary fatality rate among Montanans including a lack of seat belt use, high speed, and impaired and careless driving.² An effective strategy to reduce unnecessary motor vehicle-related injuries and deaths is to increase seat belt usage for motor vehicle occupants both by educating motor vehicle users and enforcing a primary seat belt law.³ Twenty-seven states have enacted primary seat belt laws, which allow law enforcement officers to stop a vehicle when an occupant is not wearing a seat belt. Montana currently has a secondary law, which only allows law enforcement officers to stop a vehicle and educate and/or cite the occupant for not wearing a seat belt, after another traffic violation has occurred. This issue of *Montana Public Health* uses data from the Montana Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) to assess seat belt use and attitudes towards a primary seat belt law among adult Montanans.

The BRFSS Survey The BRFSS is a state-based random digit dial telephone survey of a sample of non-institutionalized adult Montanans.⁴ Three-thousand one hundred and three Montanans were surveyed between January to June 2008. The response rate was 46%. Respondents were asked two questions: "How often do you use seat belts when you drive or ride in a car?" and "Currently Montana has a secondary seat belt law, which means law enforcement officers cannot stop vehicles because a driver or any passenger is unbelted – there must be another reason for the stop. A primary seat belt law allows officers to stop vehicles when they observe any unbelted driver or passenger in the vehicle. Do you support a primary seat belt law in Montana?" The proportions of respondents who reported always wearing a seat belt and supporting a primary seat belt law were calculated overall, and by selected demographic characteristics.

Who Always Wears Their Seat Belts? Seventy percent of respondents reported always wearing a seat belt when riding or driving in a vehicle. Women were more likely than men (78% vs. 61%) and persons aged 65 years and older (76%) were more likely than persons aged 45 to 64 years older (71%) and those aged 18 to 44 years old (66%) to report always wearing their seat belt. American Indians (74%) and whites (70%) reported similar use rates. Individuals with health insurance were more likely to report always wearing a seat belt compared to persons without health insurance (72% vs. 62%). There was no substantial difference in seat belt use by annual household income: <\$25,000 (68%), \$25,000-\$49,999 (68%), and >\$50,000 (73%), unknown (70%).

Most Montanans support a primary seat belt law Sixty-one percent of Montanans reported support of a primary seat belt law, 36% did not, and 4% were not sure. Women, older persons, American Indians, and adults with health insurance were more likely to support a primary seat belt law compared to men, younger persons, whites, and adults without health insurance (Table).

Table. Support for a primary seat belt law among adult Montanans, 2008.

<u>Characteristics</u>	<u>Percent supporting law</u>
Total	61
Sex	
Men	51
Women	70
Age (years)	
18-44	59
45-64	58
65+	71
Race	
American Indian	78
White	60
Have health insurance	
Yes	63
No	51
Annual household income	
<\$25,000	61
\$25,000-\$49,999	59
>\$50,00	60
Unknown	64

Prevention Steps Always wearing a seat belt while riding or driving in a vehicle, even for short distances, can significantly reduce one's risk of injury, disability, or death.

Implementing and enforcing a primary seat belt law is a critical public health strategy to promote this life saving behavior.

Seat Belts
**SAVE
LIVES**

Recommendation: To reduce injuries and deaths associated with motor vehicle crashes.

- Enact and enforce a primary seat belt law.
- Always wear your seat belt and make sure others in your vehicle are properly restrained.
- Always drive sober.
- Eliminate distractions that lead to careless driving (e.g., cell phone use).
- Health care professionals should counsel patients to wear a seat belt while riding or driving in a motor vehicle and to drive sober.

For more information about this report and injury prevention in Montana, contact Bobbi Perkins, Injury Prevention Coordinator at (406) 444-4126 or email at bperkins@mt.gov.

References:

1. CDC. Injury Mortality Report, Wisqars 2005, <http://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe>
2. MT DOT Highway Traffic Safety Problem Identification Report FFY 2009
3. Houston D, Richardson L. *Safety belt use and the switch to primary enforcement, 1991 – 2003*, Am J Public Health 2006;96:1949-1954
4. Montana DPHHS. BRFSS (<http://www.dphhs.mt.gov/brfss/html/brfss-index.shtml>)

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Testimony on SB 237

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Mister Chairman, committee members, good afternoon, my name is Todd Harwell. I am the Chief of the Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Bureau in the Public Health and Safety Division within the Department of Public Health and Human Services. On behalf of the Department of Public Health and Human Services, I would like to thank Senator Lewis for bring forward this important legislation.

I am not going to repeat essential information you have heard in previous testimony today. I will however, address one issue. "What do Montanans think about a primary seat belt law?"

Since 1984, the Department has conducted the Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey. This is a random digit dial telephone survey of a representative sample of non-institutionalized adult in Montanans. From January to June 2008, 3,103 Montanans were surveyed.

In 2008, we included the following statement and question in the survey to assess the attitudes of Montana adults regarding a primary seat belt law. [Statement] "Currently Montana has a secondary seat belt law, which means law enforcement officers cannot stop vehicles because a driver or any passenger is unbelted – there must be another reason for the stop. A primary seat belt law allows officers to stop vehicles when they observe any unbelted driver or passenger in the vehicle." [Question] "Do you support a primary seat belt law in Montana?" The response categories were yes, no, and not sure.

Here is what we found:

- 61% of Montana adults supported of a primary seat belt law, 36% did not, and 4% were not sure.
- There were higher levels of support for the law among:
 - Women (70%) compared to men (51%)
 - Persons 65 years of age and older (71%) compared to younger persons (<60%)
 - American Indians (78%) compared to whites (60%), and
 - Persons with health insurance (63%) compared to persons without health insurance (51%).

Our findings indicate that most Montanans support a primary seat belt law. On behalf of the Department I urge you to pass SB 237. A primary seat belt law will reduce the number of Montana drivers and passengers needlessly injured, disabled, and killed in motor vehicle crashes.

Thank you.